

CONFERENCE 2023
8TH - 10TH JUNE

ASSEMBLY BUILDINGS,
BELFAST

FOLLOWERS
OF JESUS

TOGETHER
TOGETHER
TOGETHER
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TOGETHER

Pastoral Address 2023

Recently a small group has been tasked by the Connexional Team to consider how to grow the church numerically and spiritually over the next ten years. The group noted from the beginning that this is God's work - a spiritual endeavour requiring wisdom and prayer. The group also noted that how we measure growth needs to include other factors than membership numbers. Could we also measure growth in terms of new followers of Jesus, more risks taken in terms of planting or pioneering, more investment in youth and young adults or more healthy churches that transform the world around them? When it comes to numerical growth, we don't expect that we will see sufficient growth in Methodist membership to outpace the accelerating rate of decline. We will almost certainly see more membership decline before we see growth. What does that mean for us as a Connexion? How do we pursue growth?

You will find questions for reflection throughout this address. You may wish to use these for personal or small group reflection or for discussion with your Church Council.

Growth in the early church

The first followers of Jesus were familiar with growth. Simon (Peter) and Andrew who first accepted the call to walk with Jesus witnessed the numbers of followers of Jesus grow from two to four, to twelve to seventy, and beyond. They witnessed crowds of people gathering to hear Jesus speak and many brought to him for healing. Following Jesus' death, they experienced three thousand people accept the call to follow Jesus on the day of Pentecost and were part of seeing this new community of Jesus followers increasing in numbers day by day.

Not only did they witness the early church grow in numbers - in the power of the Spirit they witnessed the gospel growing in influence and reach from Jerusalem to Judea and to the ends of

the earth as they then knew it. They saw it impact Jew and Gentile. Rich and poor. High standing citizen and outcast. Slave and free. Old and young. Male and female.

They had heard Jesus speak about growth in terms of wisdom and understanding. They were challenged to grow in love for neighbour and one another. They expected the Kingdom of God to grow ("The Kingdom of God is like this..."). They watched scarce resources being multiplied (feeding the 5000) and heard parables about investing their gifts wisely for growth. Their love for one another, and the "fruit" displayed through their lives were marks of the people who followed Jesus. Surely growth in all these ways was simply a given for them?

Question for Reflection:

How do you feel when you call to mind these stories, parables, and concepts about growth? Do they fill you with hope, making you expectant? Or do they make you feel guilty or hopeless in the face of inevitable decline?

It might feel like it is the few who are growing in love for one another and the world. We may be struggling to fill leadership positions. Our resources are scarce. It is tempting to stop hoping, to sanitise our prayers and to stop believing that growth will be possible in our times.

In His Orchard – Colossians 1:3-12

You may find it helpful to pause and read this passage in both the NIV translation and the Message paraphrase of the Bible.

Colossians 1:3-12 may offer an antidote to any sense of hopelessness. In the context of thanksgiving for their "faith in Christ Jesus," the recipients of this letter (who may have been a group of believers living in Colossae), are reminded that growth is primarily the work of God (the Message describes the context in which we do God's work as "in his orchard.") – "the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world." Moreover, this growth had been happening "since the day you heard it and truly understood God's grace." Grounded in faith and love, with hope (the Message describes this as "kept taut by hope"), leaning on wisdom and understanding ("As you learn more and more how God works, you will learn how to do your work." MSG) and strengthened by the Spirit's power, the writer's prayer was that they would have "strength to stick it out over the long haul." Despite their context of "unendurable" challenges (what these were is uncertain, but the writer may have been referring to them sharing the gospel in the context of false teaching) there was a confidence and expectation that the recipients of this letter would continue to see the good news of Jesus "bearing fruit."

Question for Reflection:

As the Methodist Church in Ireland do we have a confidence and expectation that the good news of Jesus will continue "bearing fruit?"

In preparation for this address some contributors were invited to describe "growth" in their context. They were asked to talk about how they are seeing growth in terms of any of the following: discipleship; new followers of Jesus; participation in worship/prayer/small groups; community; and mission. They were asked to describe the factors or circumstances that they think

are leading to growth. The paragraphs below summarise some of the themes raised by contributors and refer to the contributors by the numbers in brackets. You can read their full contributions at the end of this address.

Growth as the work of God

Several of the contributors echo the writer of Colossians in attributing growth to primarily the work of God.

In one church, that has welcomed new members of all ages, growth is attributed “firstly to God’s grace in response to faithful prayer.” (4) Another contributor writes “Growth is a difficult thing to manufacture or control. God undoubtedly has the central role to play in any healthy church growth.” (7) In another context, that is experiencing growth through a focus on discipleship, there is a confidence that growth is happening even when they do not see it. This contributor shared the analogy of a plant that flowers beautifully, the petals fall off and then for a season it appears that nothing is happening - “Growth was obvious when the plant bloomed but even when it had no flowers, growth was happening because then the roots grew stronger, and the stem taller...we may not be in obvious full bloom...We sense God is at work, strengthening our roots, preparing us to bloom.” (5)

In some contexts, congregation members are learning to discern together the work that God has for them - “Growing into missional living means the lives of the congregation have been looked at curiously - curious enough for someone to say, “I wonder ...” (2) One church has taken a “step of faith” to invest in a youth and children’s worker. In another place, where there is good participation in small groups across the circuit, they are asking now how “to move from just studying God’s word to being God in our world, continuing to develop how we pray with and for one another.” (9)

Questions for Reflection:

Contributor 5 shared the analogy of a flowering plant that is sometimes in bloom and yet other times it appears as if nothing is happening. Do you believe that growth is happening even if you can’t see it?

If you really grasp that growth is the work of God and not your work, how does it help you to change your perspective on growth?

“As you learn more and more how God works, you will learn how to do your work.” (The Message) – How are you and your church members learning to discern the work that God has for you to do?

Growth as our intentional action

Growth is primarily the work of God but the passage in Colossians makes it clear that it also requires significant action on our part. We are not to be passive, to sit back and wait for God to work. We must walk with Jesus, learning more and more how to do his work. Many of the contributors spoke about or described intentional attitudes and actions that they believe have been significantly important for growth.

Several contributors wrote about intentional welcome. In one place a posture of “Active welcoming means that when someone new comes, then everyone changes rather than expecting the newcomer to do all the adjusting.” (1) Another is seeking to build a sense of family “with inclusivity, embracing new members and giving them opportunities to participate” (5). Radical welcome from the moment that people encounter the church family means that “Once one household is radically welcomed and included, they become evangelists and invitation makers themselves.” (7) Another church has taken the decision to purposely value smaller versions of church so that they might encourage deeper discipleship and be a place to invite friends to experience church community. They are seeing growth as people have come and brought friends. (3)

Two contributors wrote about being intentional in the streets around their church – “Some of the members go out on the streets for an hour or two on Saturday afternoons speaking with passers-by and inviting them to church,” (6) and “Every member was asked to smile and say hello to everyone going up and down the street and engage with conversation when they were parking in the church grounds.”(2) Two have chosen to focus on particular needs – e.g. “providing a safe and welcoming place for those with autism and additional needs,” (8) and focusing “on young adults, in particular welcoming those who, for whatever reason, don’t feel comfortable going on a Sunday morning anymore. For this group, authenticity, and an openness to doubts and vulnerabilities, has been essential.” (3)

Others are intentional in setting up pastoral care teams (3, 10), running community events (3, 5), their style of worship (5, 6, 10, 8), opening up their home for worship (6) and encouraging members to be part of small groups so that they grow together as followers of Jesus (9).

Questions for Reflection:

As you read through the contributions at the end of this address, where do you see intentional actions and attitudes that are contributing to growth?

How are you already being intentional in your context?

When you consider that growth requires significant action on our part, are there intentional actions that you and your congregation need to commit to in the future?

Pursuing Growth

In the first paragraph of this address the questions was raised, “How do we pursue growth?” The examples from the early church show us that growth, in the power of the Spirit, was a given for the first followers of Jesus. Colossians 1: 3-12 offers encouragement that growth happens because the gospel bears fruit, as we work with God and play our part, even when it’s challenging. There are some signs of growth across the Connexion, as evidenced by the contributions to this address.

Read again these verses from the Message paraphrase of Colossians 1:

We pray that you'll have the strength to stick it out over the long haul—not the grim strength of gritting your teeth but the glory-strength God gives. It is strength that endures the unendurable and spills over into joy, thanking the Father who makes us strong enough to take part in everything bright and beautiful that he has for us.

For the early church, as the number of Christians grew, followers of Jesus experienced greater persecution. In the face of this persecution, they were enduring the unendurable, even death! The writer of Colossians prayed for enduring strength that leads to joy. You may find ministry and mission to be joy-giving, but it is equally possible that the only strength that you have is the “grim strength of gritting your teeth.” There could be a temptation to succumb to discouragement and equate persecution today to the decrease of the influence and reach of the institutional Church in society. We keep praying for strength for each other because it is difficult, and it may be hard to imagine growth.

There is no doubt that as Methodists in Ireland we know we should, and we want to, pursue growth! We are intentional about being wholehearted followers of Jesus who long to see the world around us transformed. Yet pursuing growth will come at a cost. It will mean making changes that take us outside of our comfort zones so that in ten or twenty years' time the church as we know it will be unrecognisable – in a good way! Pursuing growth is a choice that we must make to take bold, intentional actions to walk with Jesus in “everything bright and beautiful that he has for us!”, in the power of the Spirit, that his good news might bear fruit.

Questions for Reflection:

Do you feel you should pursue growth, or do you really want to?

Do you agree that pursuing growth will mean making changes that take us outside of our comfort zones?

What bold, intentional actions do you think are required?

Do you believe that the future that God has for us as the Methodist Church in Ireland is “bright and beautiful?”

Contributor 1

Probably the one key factor in the growth of this congregation has been welcome. The church building is on a busy street in the centre of a large, increasingly multi-ethnic city. As people have arrived here from around the world, they have either noticed the church while passing by, or they have gone looking on the Internet for a Methodist Church, or they have heard about it from a friend.

But that only brings people in the door. The key posture that has caused the congregation to grow is the fact that when people arrive, they are actively welcomed. This is more than a handshake at the door. It is an introduction to others in the congregation especially if there are any from the

same country or region. It is an invitation to pray the Lord's prayer in whatever language comes most easily. It is openness to different worship styles from around the world. It is ensuring people feel free to come to worship in their national dress, to share their culture and their food. Active welcoming means that when someone new comes, then everyone changes rather than expecting the newcomer to do all the adjusting.

Contributor 2

Our numbers had swelled by one.

One day the congregation was prevented from leaving the church due to a parade and so while we waited, we chatted.

"Are they your friend?" someone asked the minister. "No."

Another person spoke up, "I used to go to them for something."

"I used to work with them," said another.

"I have met them for coffee and we have a friend in common," still one more said.

The minister asked, "did any of you invite them to church?"

"No," "No," "No."

Growing into missional living means the lives of the congregation have been looked at curiously - curious enough for someone to say, "I wonder ..."

A lady came in the open door of the church and asked could we store a sofa for her. It had arrived at her new home, but she could not get in. The sofa was stored in the sanctuary for a while. Some looked at it with disdain - what was it doing in church?

The lady collected it on Christmas Eve 2021 and the next week arrived with her children into church. They have been with us ever since.

We decided to focus our mission on the street where the church was situated. The congregation mainly parachuted in and out of their places. Every member was asked to smile and say hello to everyone going up and down the street and engage with conversation when they were parking in the church grounds. From the street seven people are coming regularly to worship services. They feel welcome, included and they belong.

Contributor 3

We're a geographically and demographically diverse church of approximately 100 members. We've experimented for the past 3-4 years with smaller versions of church, house churches, missional communities etc. Purposely giving value to smaller groups of believers coming together. The idea is to encourage deeper discipleship and be a place to invite friends to experience church community.

Our smaller church communities meet monthly on a Sunday morning. We have 4 groups - 3 house church style (who meet in homes or out for a walk) and one group is a community café in our

church building. All have ended up incorporating the outdoors and food in their meetings. We have found these to be simple but significant resources we can share no matter our size.

In terms of growth, each group has seen friends and family included who wouldn't ordinarily come to church. One of our small churches focuses on young adults, in particular welcoming those who, for whatever reason, don't feel comfortable going on a Sunday morning anymore. For this group, authenticity, and an openness to doubts and vulnerabilities, has been essential. Young adults have come and brought friends.

We believe that the culture we create in our church is more important for growth than the activities we do. In our culture being authentic is highly valued (rightly so) – it's less about having the right answers all the time and more about exploring what it means to follow Jesus together, worries, warts, and all.

Contributor 4

We attribute growth in our church firstly to God's grace in response to faithful prayer and the earnest preaching of His word, in the context of factors that apply to the local situation.

We have an all-age congregation and continue to attract new members, young couples, and individuals, as well as middle-aged folk and retirees. Worship is contemporary and is led by gifted worship leaders and a selection of good musicians. The minister is in the pulpit on most Sundays enabling him to preach sequentially following a theme, or through a book of the Bible. Small groups meet during the week and most discuss the Sunday sermon topic using questions set by the preacher. Other prayer groups: early morning, silent prayer, meet each week, as does a Sunday night youth fellowship. Special events e.g., Evangelism Hub, Kintsugi Hope etc are run annually.

Pastoral care is very important for us. A dedicated and well organised team of pastoral visitors call on members of the congregation ongoingly and in time of particular need. This group also form a prayer chain where needs from near and far are lifted before God's throne of grace.

A weekly Wednesday welcome drop-in for the church and community is well attended. Because the minister is well known in the village, he is able to invite many to join. We maintain a high profile in the community by running large annual events such as an Alternate Halloween and community Carol singing.

Contributor 5

I was given a plant that flowered beautifully, unmistakably full of growth. The flowers fell off. For ages nothing happened. Then it flowered again, they fell off and another period of apparently

nothing, and so on. Growth was obvious when the plant bloomed but even when it had no flowers, growth was happening because then the roots grew stronger, and the stem taller.

I pastor a couple of smaller churches with members from a wide variety of nationalities and backgrounds. We may not be in obvious full bloom, but growth is happening. New people are coming and choosing to stay. Two key factors are the sense of family/community we seek to build along with inclusivity, embracing new members and giving them opportunities to participate.

We are also experiencing growth through discipleship. In one church a group of adults originally from non-Methodist backgrounds have shared in the Wholehearted course and will be officially received into membership. As a result, some are now motivated to take on leadership roles, others to become local preachers, and others to start outreach into the community. In the other church we are seeing growth through participation in the Bible study group. We take a collaborative approach to study which is leading to collaboration in other areas of church life where we're beginning to see greater participation in prayer, worship leading, and a small group collaborating with me to seek vision and direction together. We sense God is at work, strengthening our roots, preparing us to bloom.

Contributor 6

In early 2018 a young Congolese man turned up in one of our congregations. He had travelled over 60 miles to be there! He said he could only afford the price of the fuel to come once a month, which he faithfully did. Later that year, he and his family opened their home to hold services there. Other Methodists were discovered in the town and the numbers grew to the point where the living room was too small. Covid hit and services were discontinued, but the group kept in touch with each other. Services re-commenced about 2 years ago in a rented space which is owned by the local County Council.

At first services were held on Sunday afternoons, but in March 2022 members requested they move to the mornings. Some of the members go out on the streets for an hour or two on Saturday afternoons speaking with passers-by and inviting them to church. They also evangelise in their workplaces. The worship is very much Spirit led, with a strong Pentecostal influence. The congregation continues to grow week by week and there can be up to 40 people, more than half of whom are children and young people. A youth event is now running on Saturday afternoons. The congregation has just about outgrown the room in which it meets, so a search is on for a larger space.

Contributor 7

Growth is a difficult thing to manufacture or control. God undoubtedly has the central role in any healthy church growth. But let me share a few observations from where I'm seeing church communities grow. It has been where there has been a deliberate focus on just that: community.

I, as minister, am far from the expert at this, but I'm learning a lot from what I see in congregations, and the most noticeable growth in numbers I have witnessed has come from people being completely welcomed and included from the moment they come into contact with the church family.

Taking Sunday services as an example, there's no sitting quietly and assuming a warm welcome is 'someone else's job'; there's an unwritten assumption that everyone has a role to play in making sure everyone will be welcomed in, whether it's your first Sunday or you've been there every Sunday for a lifetime. I hope not in a pushy or intrusive way, but instead a way that reflects immediate inclusion into a community which calls itself family. Really getting to know one another right from the outset. Invitations into WhatsApp groups. Seeing how we can all be actively involved in aspects of church life throughout the week.

And that then ripples out. Once one household is radically welcomed and included, they become evangelists and invitation makers themselves, reaching out into their own communities and social circles and inviting others to join in too, forming a new, diverse community which seeks to follow Christ's example as we genuinely love one another.

Contributor 8

Within the church we have seen growth in a number of key areas as we have sought to build faith and community.

Back in September 2021 we took a step of faith and invested in a part time youth and children's worker. As a result of her work, we have seen the increased participation of our young people attending on a regular basis as well as new volunteers coming on board, building both faith and community among our children and young people.

In the past 12 months the church has been intentional in providing a safe and welcoming place for those with autism and additional needs. We have invested in training, sensory equipment, ear defenders etc. This has helped families with additional needs be able to engage with worship on a Sunday and other activities during the week, building faith and community within our church family.

We have also been intentional about running free outreach events at set times of the year, such as community trails at Harvest, Easter and Halloween, a nativity panto at Christmas, a pancake

giveaway on Shrove Tuesday etc. These outreach events have proved hugely successful and have provided us with key opportunities to grow and build our relationships with the wider community.

Contributor 9

Growth in our context has come through our weekly small groups. During lockdown the circuit came together for Zoom Bible studies. The breakout room option allowed for a mix of people from across the four churches in our circuit to discuss and pray for one another. Post lockdowns it seemed a natural next step to explore what this would look like moving forward. The idea of small group Bible studies gained interest and in September 2022 we began with a fantastic response of 7 small groups involving approximately 55 people. We hosted at least one small group on Monday - Thursdays at different times throughout the day widening the remit of who might be able to attend.

Each group has been led through an LICC resource on the book of Ezekiel, the Methodist Living Wholeheartedly small group resource, and most recently the Lectio course. Having established some regularity to our groups the challenge is always how do we remain open enough for others to join? And how do we move from just studying God's word to being God in our world, continuing to develop how we pray with and for one another. Growth isn't just about the wideness of how many are involved and yet we celebrate the proportion of those involved, but also the depth of our own spiritual relationships.

"Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching." Hebrews 10:24-25 NIV

Contributor 10

The context of a church in a small market town facing the challenge of a post covid era is replicated throughout the country. People stopped coming to church during the lock downs and some have never returned. It is difficult to encourage people to take up their cross and become disciples when apathy and rhythm and routine has simply stopped. In tackling this challenge, it was first of all important to ask certain questions. Firstly, what do we mean by church growth? Is it merely about getting the pews filled as much as possible and swell our numbers or do we focus on growing discipleship and community?

Our thought process changed from seeking to grow 'a church' to grow 'as church'. We stopped looking outward and began to focus on moving from being a transactional model of church to a relational church. We started having community breakfasts, and holding social gatherings, having a drop in space where people gather just to have a cup of tea and a chat. This has been highly successful and now people have invited others to come along, some bring knitting, arts, and crafts while others do a crossword. We have dedicated one service a month to a different style of

worship, one that involved lots of colour, noise and laughter and we have an evening service of healing and wholeness.

We have set up a pastoral ministry team who take responsibility for contacting and checking in with all of our congregation and offer practical support where possible. We leaned into Acts 2: 42-47 and used this as our model to grow discipleship. We have come to realise that people have an experience of church on a Sunday morning but when people feel loved and cared for, they can be encouraged to truly become part of a community where there is not just a sense of fellowship, but a sense of God's love and they can truly belong to a community that is part of the body of Christ.